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DE RUEHBK #3196/01 3520908  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 180908Z DEC 09  
FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9350  
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 7803  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0259  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 6055  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2184  
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 0240  
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 7425  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2191

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 003196

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR PRM/FO, PRM/ANE, PRM/A, EAP/MLS  
GENEVA FOR RMA  
NSC FOR WALTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/17/2019  
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#) [LA](#)  
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER: A/S SCHWARTZ VISIT TO THAILAND

REF: BANGKOK 03145 (PARTNER ON REFUGEE AFFAIRS)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Assistant Secretary Schwartz: Embassy Bangkok warmly welcomes you to Thailand and looks forward to working with you on the objectives you have outlined. Though it is the long-standing issue of the Lao Hmong refugee community that brings you here, the U.S. has many refugee and migrant-related equities in Thailand and your meetings present an opportunity for advances in these other areas as well. While developments with the Hmong have not always gone as we would like, the issue stands against the backdrop of a deep and broad relationship where Royal Thai government (RTG) cooperation has allowed us to accomplish important humanitarian objectives for tens of thousands of other refugees (reftel).

#### POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

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¶2. (C) Since the December 2008 installation of the Democrat-led coalition government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, Thailand has experienced a period of relative political stability. Nevertheless, it remains deeply divided politically and socially, and struggles to break free of its inward focus. PM Abhisit generally has progressive instincts about basic freedoms, social inequities, and foreign policy, but his government is not strong. Though enjoying relatively high approval ratings, he is beset by a fractious coalition, vigorous parliamentary opposition, and frequent opposition street protests.

¶3. (C) Underlying this political tension is the future of the monarchy. Long-reigning King Bhumibol is Thailand's most revered figure, with influence far beyond his constitutional mandate. He is 82 years old and in poor health, however, and many actors are jockeying behind the scenes to shape the dynamics of the eventual royal succession. Few observers believe that the deep divides can be bridged before King Bhumibol passes and it could be years before Thailand's political tectonic plates have resettled. Most observers believe the monarchy's role will shrink after succession.

#### ENDURING BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

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¶4. (C) Despite ongoing domestic discord, Thailand's strategic importance to the U.S. cannot be overstated. As one of only five U.S. treaty allies in Asia, Thailand remains crucial to U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. The U.S. mission in Thailand -- which is one of the largest in the world with over 2000 employees from nearly 40 different departments and agencies -- affords the U.S. a regional operating platform that would be almost impossible to replicate elsewhere.

¶5. (C) Not only is this platform key to supporting U.S. military operations and other critical humanitarian and multilateral initiatives, but it also serves as a growing foothold for our expansive bilateral relationship. In just the last three months alone, the U.S.-Thai partnership has yielded a promising new lead in the drive to develop an HIV vaccination and the seizure of more than 35 tons of North Korean weapons, two examples which serve to illustrate the depth and breadth of a relationship that provides incalculable benefits in the military, law enforcement and health/disease research fields.

LAO HMONG  
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¶6. (C) The success of your meetings with the RTG will in large part hinge on progress made in discussions with Lao officials. The RTG consistently frames the Hmong issue as an exclusively bilateral one between Thailand and Laos. Given the contentious nature of recent Thai-Cambodian relations, as well as the complex nature of Thailand's relationship with Burma, remaining on good terms with Laos appears to be a priority for the RTG. Another major concern for Thailand is ensuring that the Hmong crisis is resolved in a way that does

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not encourage further movements into Thailand. Indeed, most of the Lao Hmong at issue here appear to have been motivated by a large-scale resettlement program that through 2005 brought around 15,000 Hmong to the U.S.

¶7. (C) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is our natural interlocutor, but ultimately has minimal authority over refugee issues. Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya is largely sympathetic to refugee and other humanitarian concerns, though his bureaucracy does not always share his views. Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban oversees the refugee portfolio in the Prime Minister's office, and though he has until recently not been actively engaged with us on the issue, he is nevertheless an important player in the process.

The other key decision-makers on Lao Hmong policy are the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters (RTARF) and the Thai National Security Council (NSC), both of which have traditionally taken a hard line on refugee issues.

BURMESE REFUGEES  
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¶8. (SBU) There are just over 100,000 RTG- and UNHCR-recognized Burmese refugees in nine official camps in Thailand, and many of these refugees fled to Thailand more than 20 years ago. Another 50,000 unregistered "new arrivals" also live in the camps. The U.S. is in the midst of a large-scale resettlement program which so far has removed more than 50,000 refugees from Thailand. Our wide-ranging assistance programming covers food, shelter, health care, and gender-based violence prevention.

¶9. (SBU) But fatigue is setting in among major donors -- though not the U.S. This has created a push to allow refugees to work outside the formally closed camps. In November, the UNHCR and a group of assistance NGOs working in the camps presented the RTG with a Five Year Strategic Plan (the "Plan"). The Plan envisions greater freedom of movement and self-sufficiency activities for the refugees, and in exchange would allow refugee assistance funding to flow into

surrounding Thai communities, where services would be offered on equal terms to refugees and locals.

¶10. (SBU) The Plan is largely supported by the "soft" ministries: Public Health, Education and Labor. But this support is of little use. Once again the key actor is the NSC, which has the primary policy goal of ensuring that refugees eventually return home. The NSC views the Plan, not without reason, as the thin end of the wedge of permanent integration of Burmese refugees into Thailand. Embassy Bangkok's advocacy efforts in favor of the Plan are intense and ongoing; your meeting with senior-level NSC personnel will present a prime opportunity to advance this central refugee policy objective.

¶11. (SBU) In June 2009, fighting in Burma displaced a group of over 2,000 (estimates vary widely) ethnic Karen refugees into Thailand. The RTG responded exceptionally well: it has de facto granted asylum and allowed access to assistance providers. It has not, however, determined what is ultimately to be done with this group, currently housed in several temporary sites. We are urging the RTG to find an appropriate facility for this group, perhaps moving them into a "temporary transit shelter" - as the RTG calls refugee camps.

ROHINGYA  
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¶12. (SBU) In January 2009, an apparent "push-back" policy was applied by local officials to the seasonal wave of Rohingya boat migrants. This resulted in an outcry, and the RTG promptly quashed the policy. A total of 78 subsequently intercepted Rohingya migrants are being held indefinitely; two of them have died of illness in detention. As the ultimate disposition of this group remains undecided, we are encouraging the RTG to find an appropriate solution, including possibly submitting them to a Provincial Admissions Board (Thailand's asylum mechanism) thus making them eligible for resettlement abroad.

JOHN